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SUBJECT: RWANDA: LEVELING THE POLITICAL PLAYING FIELD?

REF: KIGALI 743

Classified By: Ambassador Michael R. Arietti, reason 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary. With the advent of a new law on political parties on June 1, the two largest independent parties have begun organizational efforts at the grassroots level, and report renewed interest among average Rwandans in party politics. With just over a year to the 2008 parliamentary elections, both the Liberal Party (PL) and Social Democratic Party (PSD), see an expanded playing field, and opportunity to make gains in elections. Meanwhile, the RPF has conducted its own internal party elections, which appeared to be open and democratic, and had some surprising results. Key to acceptable national elections next year will be both the ability of parties such as the PL and PSD to campaign freely, and an accurate vote count by election authorities. As both local officials and local populations realize that other parties can and will make appeals to them, unlike 2003, the playing field may become a bit more level. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On June 1 a new law on political parties went into effect, allowing the establishment of offices at "all the country's administrative entities." The prior law allowed offices only at the national and provincial levels. In Rwanda's administrative structure, below the capital of Kigali and the four provinces lie districts (30), sectors (416), cells (2148) and villages (7000). Both the Liberal Party (PL) and Social Democratic Party (PSD) anticipated the change in the law and began initial organizational efforts in the spring that culminated, after enactment of the law, in local elections for the PL at the sector and district levels, and for the PSD at the district level. (FYI: the PL also conducted hotly-contested elections at the national level, while the PSD's national officials, elected in 2005, remain in office. End FYI). Both parties have told us that, while the previous law did not actually forbid party organizers from contacting members and electing officials at the local level, in practice local government officials often frowned on any form of organizational effort. Both parties report that since June 1 the change in the law has been received positively by local officials; the PL has taken to distributing the text of the new law to local officials as the occasion arises.

¶3. (SBU) Both parties also tell us that their formal ability to organize at every administrative level is constrained by their severe lack of resources. Looking toward the 2008 elections, both plan to open offices at the provincial level and hope for offices at the district level; offices at sectors, cells or villages are beyond their capacity. Said Senator Odette Nyiramilimo, just elected as PL Vice

President, "local people are starting to realize that we can now come to them, and local officials are becoming aware that we are allowed to do so. But we don't have the money to reach them." PSD officials make similar remarks, often comparing their resource base to that of the ruling RPF. For example, PSD Vice President Marc Rugenera told us recently, "it comes down to which businesses will support you, and RPF has many more companies than we do." Fund raising, say both parties, "is everything."

¶4. (C) Both the PL and the PSD hope to increase their respective parliamentary vote totals in 2008. In 2003, the RPF won 74 percent, the PSD 12 percent, and the PL 11 percent; the other five parties split the remaining three percent. The PL and PSD each believes it can roughly double its totals, to something approaching twenty percent or more. Said Rugenera, "bringing the PRF under fifty percent is probably impossible, but we can reduce its margin." Each also hopes for an accurate tallying of the vote. "We think we already won 20 percent in 2003," asserted Rugenara, but "votes were not counted properly." (FYI: an NDI assessment of the 2003 elections cited "multiple instances of government harassment of opposition parties," "blurred lines between the ruling party and the State," and "inhibited political discourse at the grassroots level," among other problems. End FYI). The PL in particular claims that new supporters are joining the party every day, including disaffected RPF members, described by Nyiramilino as ambitious, educated men and women who "are tired of the crowded field" in RPF circles. "They are coming to us from a sense of frustration -- they can't move up in the RPF."

¶5. (SBU) Both the PL and the PSD agree that a difficult task

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for their parties will be to distinguish themselves from the RPF. With senior members of both parties serving within a power-sharing government, as do other parties (such power-sharing required by the constitution), they also share authority and responsibility for government policies and programs. The high emotions generated at the recent PL party congress reflected in part the tension between those who advocated a more independent line from the RPF and those who wish to continue the party's present cooperative course. In the end, the election of Commerce Minister Protais Mitali as president, and Odette Nyiramilimo as vice president, placed party leadership largely in the hands of the cooperative faction.

¶6. (C) Some party leaders, however, are concerned that cooperation may not always be a two-way street. Days after his election as PL president, Mitali found himself found himself on the front pages of the government-aligned New Times, his ministry accused of contract and tendering abuse. While this investigation into ministry affairs is part of a long-standing prosecutorial effort to pursue potential misuse of funds by many GOR institutions (see reftel), the timing looked suspicious to some within the PL. Speaking recently to polchief, Member of Parliament and newly re-elected treasurer of the PL Elie Ngirabakunzi said, "the RPF is not above placing someone from another party in a high position and then weakening them with continuing allegations." (FYI: the on-going investigation and local headlines have featured ruling party RPF members as well as Mitali. End FYI).

¶7. (SBU) The ruling RPF also held its own recent local party elections at sector and district levels, with provincial elections coming soon. By all reports, the elections were open and democratic. To the surprise of many within the party, most serving RPF members of parliament lost their bid to secure local party positions. By contrast, most serving RPF mayors (mayors are ostensibly non-partisan officials, but the 30 district mayors are generally associated with one party or another) won election. RPF General Secretary Francois Ngarambe told polchief that the MPs, being elected from a national list in 2003, with no local constituency

formally assigned to them under the law, rarely visited their home areas, and were "completely unknown" to local residents.

Mayors, however, worked day by day in the districts, are well-known to the local populations. That made all the difference, he said, and was a lesson to keep in mind for 2008. Acknowledging the RPF's preeminent position in Rwandan politics, Ngarambe said that "parties have the right to organize. But you have to work for support as well, not just stay in the capital. We have the support of Rwandans and we are going to keep it."

¶8. (C) Comment. The RPF dominates the political landscape, and will continue to do so. Its powers of patronage, as the leader of the power-sharing government, and its clearly superior ability to raise campaign funds, means other parties must play catch-up as they begin to organize in earnest at local levels. However, both the PL and the PSD cautiously report a new atmosphere underway, as both local officials and local populations realize that other parties can and will make appeals to them. This may be no small change: the idea that the government and the RPF are more or less the same has been widespread in the countryside. Unlike 2003, will there be a level playing field for all political parties in 2008? The field has just become a bit more level.

End comment.

ARIETTI